

LIBERATED

Story by Renita Foster

Thanks to one man's courage, daring and ingenuity, Allied troops freed from a German prison camp at the end of World War II welcomed their liberators with the Stars and Stripes.

Army Air Forces 1LT Martin Allain (above) climbed the flagpole at Moosburg POW camp to raise the flag he'd kept hidden for years.

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SATURDAY, April 28th, 1945, brought nothing but rain all day and night, drowning away any rescue hopes so desperately held by the “kriegies” (short for the German word “kriegsgefangen,” meaning prisoners of war), at Stalag VII-A, near Moosburg, Germany.

The last POW camp to be liberated by the Americans, Stalag VII-A was also the place of incarceration for Army Air Forces 1LT Martin Allain.

The 23-year-old bomber pilot became a prisoner of war when his B-26 was shot down over North Africa in January 1943. After being captured by Arabs and turned over to German soldiers, Allain was taken to Germany where he was interrogated and held in solitary confinement.

During an initial search, Allain hid a Sacred Heart medal under his tongue. It was the first of two prized possessions he would guard with his life during his years as a prisoner of war.

“My mother presented Martin with the medal that first Sunday in December of 1941,” said Allain’s sister, Net Garon. “Everyone gathered together that day to spend as much time with him as possible before he reported for flight training. Just a few hours later, we learned about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which made us feel all the worse.”

While being held at his initial POW camp in Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Poland, Allain received his next

treasure; a huge American flag smuggled into the compound to be displayed for identification should the liberators come. Allain sewed the flag between two German blankets for safekeeping.

The prisoners were taken from Stalag Luft III in January 1945, when the renewed threat of the Russian winter offensive caused the Germans to evacuate the camp. When the order came, Allain grabbed his blankets for a six-day forced march in sub-zero temperatures from Poland to Germany, arriving at Moosburg in early February.

“I don’t think at the time Martin knew just how significant that flag would become,” said Lila, who became Allain’s wife a few months before he left for overseas in 1942. “He simply felt it was his responsibility to make sure it was available if needed.”

For Allain, the medal and the flag were a source of comfort during the next three months, when Stalag VII-A brought nothing but unbearable cold and hunger. The winding down of World War II had forced the Germans to move other POWs from other camps to Moosburg. A facility designed to house 3,000 prisoners now swelled to more than 30,000.

The overcrowding meant little food and no hot water for cooking or washing. As a result, the straw beds were infested with lice and fleas. The outdoor latrines, one for about every 2,000 men, had eventually overflowed, promoting disease.

During this time Allain’s brightest

moment came when he found a kitten that he was determined to help survive. His darkest moment came when he returned to his barracks after work detail to find nothing left of the animal but its skin.

The next morning, Sunday, April 29, the Moosburg kriegies awakened to brilliant sunshine, restoring their belief that freedom just might be near.

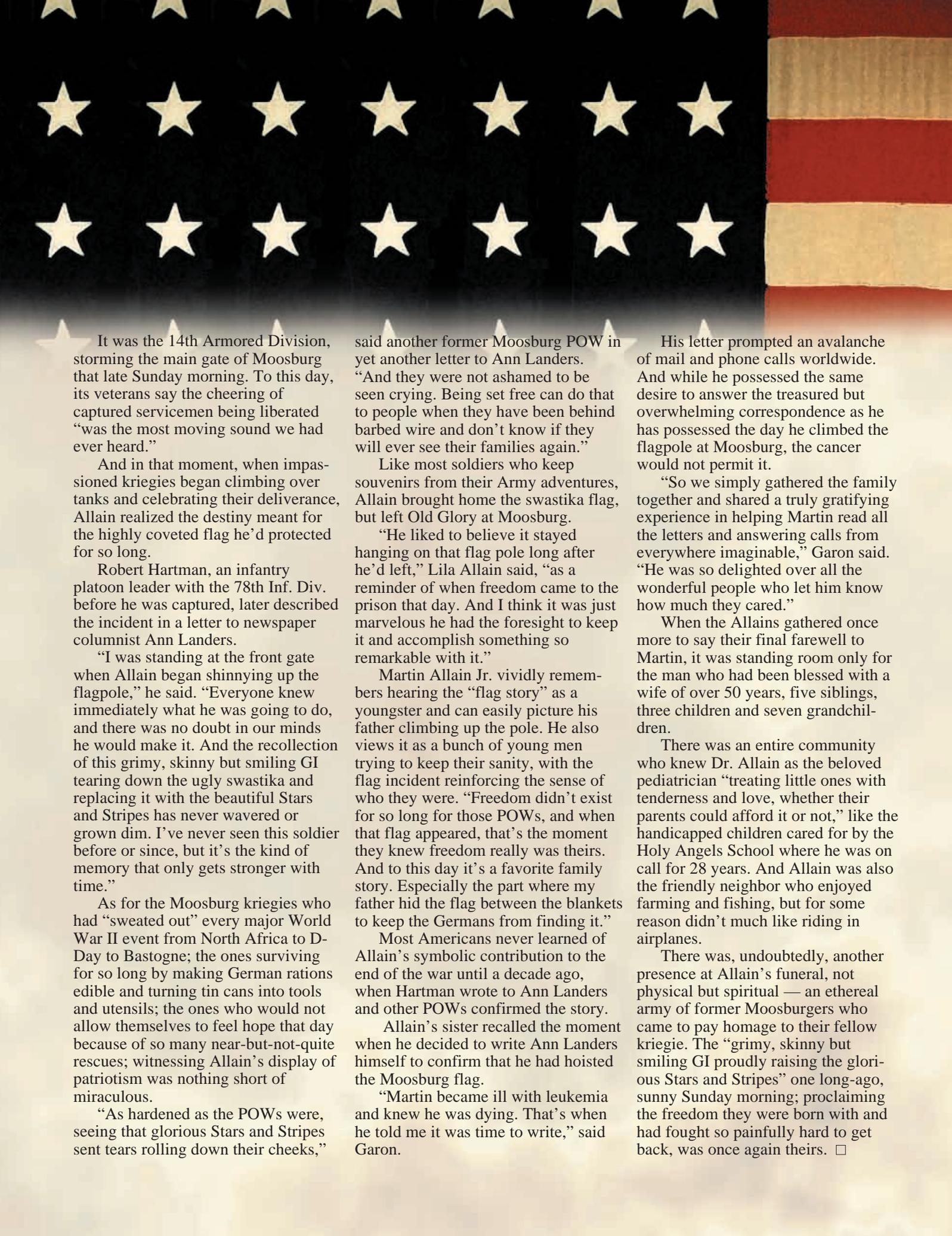
“McGuffy,” the code name for the British Broadcasting Company, heard by kriegies over hidden radios, had announced that GEN George S. Patton’s 3rd Army was northeast of Munich. This startling revelation sent prisoners scurrying to examine their secret maps, confirming that Moosburg was indeed close to that area. As the morning progressed, so did excitement in the camp. Men grouped together, whispering, planning and praying this just might be the day.

The kriegies heard the long-awaited, soul-stirring sounds of freedom even before their rescuers appeared. Just over the horizon was the unmistakable sound of a Piper Cub. As the observation craft came gliding over the Bavarian evergreens, it wagged its wings over the camp, and thousands of voices boomed up to greet it.

The powerful engines of two P-51 Mustangs followed the Cub. And then, the most heartening sound of all: the deep rumble of tanks approaching from beyond the surrounding hills.

From the second they were spotted to their arrival at the main gate, the rescue machines were literally drowned out by the deafening sound of kriegie jubilation.

Renita Foster is a feature writer for the Fort Monmouth, N.J., Message.

The background of the page is a close-up of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes. The stars are white on a dark blue field, and the stripes are red and white. The flag is slightly blurred and has a soft glow.

It was the 14th Armored Division, storming the main gate of Moosburg that late Sunday morning. To this day, its veterans say the cheering of captured servicemen being liberated “was the most moving sound we had ever heard.”

And in that moment, when impassioned kriegies began climbing over tanks and celebrating their deliverance, Allain realized the destiny meant for the highly coveted flag he’d protected for so long.

Robert Hartman, an infantry platoon leader with the 78th Inf. Div. before he was captured, later described the incident in a letter to newspaper columnist Ann Landers.

“I was standing at the front gate when Allain began shinnying up the flagpole,” he said. “Everyone knew immediately what he was going to do, and there was no doubt in our minds he would make it. And the recollection of this grimy, skinny but smiling GI tearing down the ugly swastika and replacing it with the beautiful Stars and Stripes has never wavered or grown dim. I’ve never seen this soldier before or since, but it’s the kind of memory that only gets stronger with time.”

As for the Moosburg kriegies who had “sweated out” every major World War II event from North Africa to D-Day to Bastogne; the ones surviving for so long by making German rations edible and turning tin cans into tools and utensils; the ones who would not allow themselves to feel hope that day because of so many near-but-not-quite rescues; witnessing Allain’s display of patriotism was nothing short of miraculous.

“As hardened as the POWs were, seeing that glorious Stars and Stripes sent tears rolling down their cheeks,”

said another former Moosburg POW in yet another letter to Ann Landers.

“And they were not ashamed to be seen crying. Being set free can do that to people when they have been behind barbed wire and don’t know if they will ever see their families again.”

Like most soldiers who keep souvenirs from their Army adventures, Allain brought home the swastika flag, but left Old Glory at Moosburg.

“He liked to believe it stayed hanging on that flag pole long after he’d left,” Lila Allain said, “as a reminder of when freedom came to the prison that day. And I think it was just marvelous he had the foresight to keep it and accomplish something so remarkable with it.”

Martin Allain Jr. vividly remembers hearing the “flag story” as a youngster and can easily picture his father climbing up the pole. He also views it as a bunch of young men trying to keep their sanity, with the flag incident reinforcing the sense of who they were. “Freedom didn’t exist for so long for those POWs, and when that flag appeared, that’s the moment they knew freedom really was theirs. And to this day it’s a favorite family story. Especially the part where my father hid the flag between the blankets to keep the Germans from finding it.”

Most Americans never learned of Allain’s symbolic contribution to the end of the war until a decade ago, when Hartman wrote to Ann Landers and other POWs confirmed the story.

Allain’s sister recalled the moment when he decided to write Ann Landers himself to confirm that he had hoisted the Moosburg flag.

“Martin became ill with leukemia and knew he was dying. That’s when he told me it was time to write,” said Garon.

His letter prompted an avalanche of mail and phone calls worldwide. And while he possessed the same desire to answer the treasured but overwhelming correspondence as he has possessed the day he climbed the flagpole at Moosburg, the cancer would not permit it.

“So we simply gathered the family together and shared a truly gratifying experience in helping Martin read all the letters and answering calls from everywhere imaginable,” Garon said. “He was so delighted over all the wonderful people who let him know how much they cared.”

When the Allains gathered once more to say their final farewell to Martin, it was standing room only for the man who had been blessed with a wife of over 50 years, five siblings, three children and seven grandchildren.

There was an entire community who knew Dr. Allain as the beloved pediatrician “treating little ones with tenderness and love, whether their parents could afford it or not,” like the handicapped children cared for by the Holy Angels School where he was on call for 28 years. And Allain was also the friendly neighbor who enjoyed farming and fishing, but for some reason didn’t much like riding in airplanes.

There was, undoubtedly, another presence at Allain’s funeral, not physical but spiritual — an ethereal army of former Moosburgers who came to pay homage to their fellow kriegie. The “grimy, skinny but smiling GI proudly raising the glorious Stars and Stripes” one long-ago, sunny Sunday morning; proclaiming the freedom they were born with and had fought so painfully hard to get back, was once again theirs. □